

I-78 Set To Be Alternative Fuels Corridor – Could Routes 22 and 33 be Next?

Efforts to reduce carbon emissions are changing how we travel and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation has decided Interstate 78 should help lead the way into a greener future.

PennDOT is recommending to the Federal Highway Administration that I-78 be designated as an Alternative Fuel Corridor, making the highway a more attractive route for people with electric or compressed natural gas (CNG) vehicles and putting it in line for the funding needed to install alternative fueling stations.

It's the third round of designations for a federal program started in 2016, and LVPC officials are asking that Routes 22 and 33 be added to the list in the next round. Interstate 476, the Pennsylvania Turnpike Northeast Extension, was designated in 2016.

"Historically, the corridors have been along the interstates, but we think Route 22 and Route 33 warrant being considered," said Michael Donchez, LVPC Senior Transportation Planner. "They both have volumes comparable to I-78 and are used extensively for freight movements."

As scientists, planners and political leaders call for the need to slow the rate of global warming, alternative fuels are being developed to lessen the need for gas-powered vehicles that cause the kind of carbon emissions that are contributing to global warming. As those calls grow louder, the market has followed with more electric and CNG vehicles.

There are reportedly six million electric vehicles worldwide. That number has doubled since 2017 and the International Energy Agency forecasts that it will grow to 125 million by 2030.

"The primary reason to do it is it opens things up to apply for funding to build the electric vehicle infrastructure," said Dan Szekeres, a Michael Baker International Transportation Consultant with PennDOT. "The ultimate goal is to designate a corridor that will have enough options that if I'm driving an alternative fuel vehicle, I can be confident to make it to my next charging station."

The purpose, Szekeres said, is to encourage public and private investment in corridors where more stations would be built and signage added to help users find them. Though electric and CNG appear to be a current focus, the designation also gives special consideration to "locally generated fuel", which could range from solar to hydroelectric to wind power.

There are seven Tesla charging stations scattered around the Lehigh Valley, and more than a dozen other electric charging stations, including several in public parking structures and at hotels. But many more will be needed to handle the increases being forecast.

“We know these alternative fuel vehicles will be in greater use in the future,” Donchez said. “It makes sense to prepare and support the deployment of the alternative fuels network now.”